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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4108
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 0406
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0169
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 2197
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J2 MIAMI FL
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0109

UNCLAS GEORGETOWN 000954

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SUBJECT: STRING OF SUSPICIOUS FIRES FUELS GOSSIP

11. (SBU) Summary: Unexplained fires have recently damaged a series of buildings in Georgetown and beyond. Arson is suspected, but authorities have not determined if there was foul play. Memories of previous post-election arson and the nature of the burned properties--two regional government headquarters, a Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) building, government-affiliated media outlets, and an Indo-Guyanese owned business--have led some to suspect renegade elements within the losing opposition party, the Afro-Guyanese identified People's National Congress/Reform (PNC/R). However, other theories abound--including that the fires were set by disgruntled civil servants, or started to collect insurance or cover up government corruption. In the absence of conclusive forensic evidence, all explanations are speculative. End summary.

12. (SBU) In the past four weeks, fires have caused extensive damage to the Region Five and Region Four Administration Buildings, the National Communications Network (NCN) Linden TV transmission station, the Guyana Power and Light (GPL) Garden of Eden generating plant, the GECOM National Registration Center, a vacant building last occupied by the state radio station, and a downtown clothing store owned by an Indo-Guyanese businessman.

13. (SBU) Newly installed Home Affairs Minister Clement Rohee has promised to prosecute the perpetrators under the Terrorism Act, should arson be proven. At present, no official has declared the fires a linked sequence of criminal actions, and the police have few leads. Nobody has been killed by the blazes, most of which have occurred at night, outside of business hours. On the street, almost everybody guesses that the fires are malicious and connected, but nobody agrees who set them. Some point fingers at political troublemakers, perhaps within the PNC/R, but others cite insurance motives, or accuse the government of wanting to cover up wrongdoing. GECOM Chairman Steve Surujbally claims that all of the records destroyed in the flames had been backed up electronically, but gossipers wonder if somebody had good reason to incinerate the paper documents, which included the registration information used to compile the Official List of Electors for the 2006 elections.

14. (SBU) Press coverage has been extensive. Public interest is informed by Guyana's history of post-election fires, including unexplained blazes in several ministries, People's Progressive Party (PPP) affiliated buildings, and Indo-Guyanese owned properties after the 1992, 1997, and 2001 elections. The independent Stabroek News has lambasted the Guyana Fire Service (GFS) for failing to gather forensic

evidence to explain the fires, and has called on Rohee to bring in outside investigators if necessary.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: At present the suspicious blazes just stoke the rumor mill. But if mysterious fires continue to flare up, they could spark something more sinister--the specter of the post-election violence, fear, and unrest Guyanese thought they had finally banished. The fires are also an early test of Minister Rohee's ability to improve the lackluster performance of Home Affairs in its core mandate to protect life and property.
Robinson